

*\*This is an early draft. I'd be grateful for any feedback, particularly critical feedback. Please send any to the above email address. Thank you!*

## **Two Dogmas of Zen Buddhism**

Read widely in Zen Buddhism and it becomes clear: the majority of writers, with the notable exception of Dōgen, approach language as Wittgenstein does in the *Tractatus*. That is, they write as though language, concepts, and meaning are centered around the function of describing the facts. These writers do not offer a theory of how this is possible, as Wittgenstein did; instead, they offer a *theory* of how terribly inadequate language is for the task of describing the world as it really is. In fact, language not only fails to allow us to say how things *really* are, but it necessarily obscures reality from us. This is what I am calling the first dogma of Zen Buddhism. The second dogma of Zen Buddhism is that enlightenment is centrally the cultivation of *a certain kind of experience*, e.g., the experience of realizing the true nature of reality, i.e., its *emptiness*. These two dogmas usually go hand in hand, the one supporting the other.

Representative of these claims, consider Mario D'Amato's noting that, "a dominant theme in Mahāyāna soteriological thought is that language and conceptualization are at the root of the problem with sentient existence..."<sup>1</sup> Further, discussing what he takes to be the third of three ways one may describe something, Garma C.C. Chang writes that direct pointing, as with a finger, *without employing concepts*, is "the best and in fact the only genuine way to describe Emptiness.... It is this approach which is frequently applied in Zen Buddhism."<sup>2</sup> And not only

---

<sup>1</sup> D'Amato 2009, 41-42.

<sup>2</sup> My emphasis.

are concepts supposedly unnecessary for describing/pointing to emptiness, but concepts and explanations occlude how things really are—most notably the reality of emptiness (*sunyata*). The latter is a point that Thomas Kasulis emphasizes a number of times in his *Zen Action, Zen Person*. For example, he writes, “Concepts are *samvrti*; they literally ‘cover’ or ‘obstruct’ the way things are actually experienced.”<sup>3</sup> Further:

The Zen Buddhist view is that intellectualizations, concepts, even language itself are inadequate for expressing our experience as it is experienced. We go through life thinking that our words and ideas mirror what we experience, but repeatedly we discover that the distinctions taken to be true are merely mental constructs.<sup>4</sup>

As Toru Funaki puts it in his discussion of Merleau-Ponty and Shinran, “In Zen Buddhism...the practitioner aims at reaching an absolute stage where language is of no import as that stage lies beyond linguistic understanding.”<sup>5</sup>

I am not claiming that all of these writers understand Zen’s rejection of language in the same way, nor in only one way. Nor do I want to claim that in other contexts these writers/thinkers would not acknowledge other functions of language. However, in making the quoted claims, I am saying that they are stuck in time with the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, for, at least in the context of Zen (Buddhist) soteriology, they see the function of what I will call the *lingo-conceptual apparatus* as *purely descriptive*.<sup>6</sup> And they speak of enlightenment as though it were first and foremost the *unmediated experience* of the world in all its *emptiness*.

---

<sup>3</sup> Kasulis, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Kasulis, 55.

<sup>5</sup> Funaki 2009, 113.

<sup>6</sup> And this despite, for example, Kasulis’s claim that “Nagarjuna rejects a strictly atomistic interpretation of language: the view that individual terms correspond one-to-one with bits of reality. Words are dependent on other words; concepts on other concepts. Nāgārjuna, in effect, moves from a picture theory of language to a language game theory...” (22). In describing Nāgārjuna’s views on concepts/language

The purpose of this paper is to undermine these two dogmas by arguing for an alternative picture of Zen (Buddhist) practice. What is needed is, first, an appreciation that not only do we do more with language than attempt (and fail) to say how things are in the world, but *language, concepts, and meanings are embodied through our dispositions, abilities, comportment, and actions*. The various forms of embodiment are done in a multifarious variety of ways. The one that we will focus on here is the way in which our conceptual life is embedded not in some kind of overt description or *voicing*, in the mind or aloud, of how we take the world to be; but rather, our conceptual life is *embedded in what we might call the rule governed patterns of action that we either explicitly engage in or are always ready to engage in*. My focus will be on occurrent embodiments of concepts instead of dispositions. This will become clearer as we proceed.

The second thing that is needed is to move away from the conception of enlightenment as centrally the cultivation, or break through to (*kenshō*), a certain kind of experience. Looking at Dōgen's Zen we can see that what is central is the enactment of enlightenment through embodied activities, attitudes, and ultimately the embodiment of emptiness itself in such a way that one goes beyond the distinction of form and emptiness. This is not to deny that experience is an important part of Zen (Buddhist) practice; however, it is to say that we go astray, committing a kind of Cartesian error, separating body and mind when we think primarily in terms of experience as a nonconceptual representation of reality as it really is.

Once this picture is fleshed out and defended, we will see a new way of looking at what Zen tries so hard to do, i.e., get us to break with unskillful patterns of behavior. But such breaks with, or perhaps better, letting go of, unskillful dispositions and patterns of behavior do means neither purging ourselves of, nor transcending, the lingo-conceptual apparatus. There is no lingo-

---

this way, he may distance Nāgārjuna and himself from the picture theory of the Tractatus, but he does not distance either of them from the idea that language (primarily) functions *to describe how things are*.

conceptual apparatus that is distinct from our being, whether it is *enlightened* or *unenlightened being*. As soon as we engage, or are able or disposed to engage, in certain (rule-governed) patterns, we are in the realm of the conceptual. We cannot, *nor need we*, get away from it. And insofar as Zen practitioners have thought they have done so, they have been mistaken, operating with a flawed view of the nature and role of the lingo-conceptual apparatus constituting their lives.

This latter point brings us to a final consideration: if enlightenment has been possible even with a flawed view of the lingo-conceptual “apparatus,” then why does it matter? One obvious answer is that insofar as the truth matters, this matters. But further, another consideration is how a mistaken view of the lingo-conceptual affects practitioners. Even if the problematic conception of the lingo-conceptual apparatus has not denied people enlightenment, that does not entail that it does not interfere with those who sincerely practice.

As already said, there are a number of philosophers who have written on what I will call the embodiment of language—Hamann, Herder, Humboldt, and Merleau-Ponty, for example—however, we will focus primarily on Wittgenstein’s work and contemporary authors writing on the problem of concepts, and in particular concept possession. In regard to Zen, I will focus on Dōgen’s Zen with the strong suspicion that what is said in regard to his Zen and our lingo-conceptual apparatus would be applicable to other conceptions of Zen and Buddhism more generally—though this suspicion will not be robustly defended here.

I am not the first to challenge these “dogmas.” Robert Sharf has forcefully challenged the dogma regarding experience, as have Uchiyama and Okumura from their perspective as Japanese Sōtō Zen monks. Hee-Jin Kim has also argued extensively in his exposition of Dōgen’s Zen for the view that language is not an impediment to enlightenment but can be not only a means to its

realization but a form of enacting and expressing it. However, as far as I can tell, this paper will be the first to put together the two dogmas as I do and to offer an integrated a response that centers on both the embodiment of enlightenment through the embodiment of the concept of *emptiness*, which is itself the embodiment of a cluster of concepts, for example, *letting go*, *cause and effect*, and *compassion*.

### **The Trouble with Language and Concepts**

Concepts and language are intimately connected; nevertheless, we should not simply assume that to employ concepts is to employ language, even though employing language requires employing concepts. This might mean either a) that a person/non-human animal might employ concepts without learning language or b) having learned language, a person may employ concepts without thinking, speaking, or writing anything using language. I will here be interested in cases of b). Given this clarification, why exactly is the use of our lingo-conceptual apparatus supposed to be problematic from the Zen Buddhist perspective? Let us note that we probably should not expect a single reply to this question. And, indeed, in writing on “the implications of Nāgārjuna’s theory of emptiness,” Kasulis identifies three ways in which language (conceptualization) means “taking a stand” that implies problematic limitations:

- (1) Words cannot be assumed to be referents to nonlinguistic bits of reality.
- (2) No philosophical assertion based on conceptual distinctions can avoid an implicit acceptance of both of the opposing elements of the distinction. That is, any assertion of one side of a distinction over the other is, at its foundation, self-contradictory.
- (3) Any assertion or

distinction only highlights one aspect of a situation and, in so doing, casts into shadows an equally important, though incompatible, aspect.<sup>7</sup>

I want to focus on the second and third of Kasulis's claims. In his discussion, he runs these two together in a way that does not correspond exactly to his explicit division in the above quoted paragraph. Be that as it may, the quotation from Kasulis at the beginning of this paper, namely, "Concepts are *samvṛti*; they literally 'cover' or 'obstruct' the way things are actually experienced"<sup>8</sup> occurs in the context of his elaboration of the second claim. The example he uses to illustrate the above claim about concepts concerns the concepts of *cause* and *effect*. It seems we have two concepts and as such there should be two distinct "things" that they pick out. However, according to Kasulis, Nāgārjuna points out that our *experience* of cause and effect is not of two separate things, but rather the experienced cause "and" effect are really the experience of a unity. More precisely:

...in observing a series of events, we cannot see the prior event as a cause until we have also identified a succeeding event as an effect. Our labeling of cause and effect are simultaneous. Of course, Nāgārjuna does not argue from this observation that cause does not really precede effect. His overall argument is simply that our conceptual analysis of a situation is not a straightforward reflection of the way the situation is directly experienced. Concepts are *samvṛti*; they literally 'cover' or 'obstruct' the way things are actually experienced.<sup>9</sup>

Note Kasulis's "directly" in "His overall argument is simply that our conceptual analysis of a situation is not a straightforward reflection of the way the situation is *directly* experienced."

Presumably the idea is that what we directly experience is the unity—*this* is only a cause because

---

<sup>7</sup> Kasulis, 21-22.

<sup>8</sup> Kasulis, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Kasulis, 23.

*this* is an effect—but in bringing in language, we divide the one from the other. This is particularly important in the Zen context as one of the central aspects of emptiness is the non-duality or non-separation of every “thing” that exists in the world. And it the taking of things, including ourselves and that of others, as truly separable that underwrites, makes possible, our attachments, and thus our suffering. And here it is our lingo-conceptual apparatus that is supposed to underwrite that division of the world into separate “things.” And, so, while, “The gap between such concepts and their referents is not so great that language is to be avoided entirely. Nāgārjuna’s only claim is that since there *is* a gap, we can never reach reality through conceptual means alone.”<sup>10</sup> This “alone” may make it seem as though Kasulis is not reading Nāgārjuna as requiring the purging or transcending of the conceptual, but only the recognition of its intrinsically misleading nature. However, given the other passages we’ve seen, it is clear that Kasulis reads Nagarjuna as holding that concepts (language) do occlude how things really are.

Moreover, according to Kasulis, when we attempt to justify the division of cause and effect, we must look at the phenomenon experienced, say an acorn growing into an oak, which is itself unitary. And in so doing, we lose the impetus for the distinction of the cause into the effect. He continues:

In short, in analyzing any conceptual dichotomy, we fluctuate between two contradictory models (in this case, the growth of the tree versus the acorn/oak) which depend on each other for their definition; neither constitutes a satisfactory description in itself. This principle of interdependence is reminiscent of Murti’s explanation of Nāgārjuna’s principle of relation: every relation must perform the contradictory task of maintaining that the related entities are both completely identical and completely different.

---

<sup>10</sup> Kasulis, 23.

Words in themselves, according to Nāgārjuna, are empty of independent reality: they exist as practical instruments for daily life. Their function is to highlight some aspect of a situation, but in so doing, they necessarily cast some other, equally real, aspect into the shadows.<sup>11</sup>

While much deserves comment here, the two aspects of what he writes that I want to focus on are, again, 1) the claim that there are two distinct possibilities in front of us in the context of Zen Buddhist practice: Either operate with language/concepts and fail to see how things really are, or somehow purge our experience of, or transcend, concepts (or at least certain ones), for only then is there access to reality as it really is. The soteriological point of this either/or is that only the latter can effect enlightenment and the cessation of suffering. And 2) in focusing on the ways that the lingo-conceptual leads us astray from experiencing things as they really are, Kasulis clearly focuses on the experience of Zen. When we employ concepts not only do they not correspond to how things really are, but we also foreground some things that are there and hide in the shadows other aspects. The implication seeming to be that the experience of enlightenment leaves it all open, not one thing foregrounded over another.

The argument of this paper is, in a sense, straightforward. Kasulis, et al., fail to understand fully the nature of concept *employment*, particularly in the context of embodying enlightenment through our actions. They commit what I call the descriptive fallacy, i.e., the mistake in thinking that concepts play a merely/primarily descriptive function. Once concept

---

<sup>11</sup> Kasulis, 24. A further illustration of the claims here regarding concepts is found in Hee-Jin Kim's discussion of Dōgen's views on nonthinking (*hi-shiryō*), thinking (*shiryō*), and not-thinking (*fu-shiryō*). Kim notes Izutsu Toshihiko's interpretation of Dōgen's view of nonthinking in which "thinking is the most serious impediment to spiritual realization" (Kim 2007, 80): "[Toshihiko] ... suggests a thinking... that operates in a totally different form and at quite a different level of consciousness from the one we are familiar with in our daily experience; it is activated by wiping out all images, ideas, and concepts from one's consciousness—by opening up to the primordial undifferentiated as the ground of all things prior to their differentiation" (Kim 2007, 80).



employment and its relation to enacting enlightenment are properly understood, then one can begin to see clearly that the above either/or, either language and false experience or no language and enlightened experience, is a false dichotomy. There is no purging or transcending of concepts that would effect such a possible divide between a) experience of things as they are *with* language/concepts and b) experience of how things really are without out language/concepts. The alternative picture, again, is that we enact enlightenment through embodying conceptual employment, most particular, the embodied employment of supposedly ineffable concepts, i.e., concepts that pertain to the purportedly ineffable aspects of enlightenment experience.

### **Conceptualism and the Employment of Concepts**

One possible way to counter the implication of Kasulis's reading of Nāgārjuna and Zen more broadly, namely, that experiencing reality as it really is in its emptiness requires some kind of lingo-conceptual purge or transcendence, would be to argue for some kind of conceptualism. That is, if we understand something's having intentional content as its being about something, then conceptualism, broadly construed, is the view that, "no intentional content, however portentous or mundane, is a content unless it is structured by concepts that the bearer possess."<sup>12</sup> Put more precisely, conceptualism is the view that, "For any perceptual experience  $\phi$ , (i)  $\phi$  has a Fregean proposition as its content and (ii) a subject of  $\phi$  must possess a concept for each item represented by  $\phi$ ."<sup>13</sup> Thus, conceptualism is the view that experience has intentional content, what I would call *determinate (or perhaps definite) content* (as well), *only to the extent that it is*

---

<sup>12</sup> Gunther 2003, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Bengson, Grube, and Korman 2011, 168. I take it that the notion of a "Fregean proposition" here is to emphasize the idea of a proposition whose *sense* is a product of its conceptual parts—a sense that is to be distinguished from its possible referent. This needn't commit us to an ontology of mind-independent propositions along the lines of abstract objects.

*structured by concepts that the person possesses.*<sup>14</sup> On the assumption that the experience of emptiness that Kasulis implies as being free from language is not the experience of something without content, however ineffable it may be claimed to be, then the above kind of conceptualism would imply two important results: 1) that the experience of emptiness is not free of concepts, in particular those constituting the concept emptiness, and 2) that if it is ineffable, then it cannot be ineffable in any possible sense that would imply being unstructured by concepts.

I have argued elsewhere for this kind of conceptualism along broadly (later) Wittgensteinian lines in order to counter the way the lingo-conceptual is usually understood in Zen.<sup>15</sup> However, for a number of reasons, I think a stronger position can be made against the claim that Zen eschews concepts in order to experience reality as it is, namely, as empty. In part because of Wittgenstein's problematizing remark \_\_\_\_\_. But more importantly because I now see the two dogmas of Zen as integrated, i.e., the rejection of concepts as obfuscating is concomitant with the focus on enlightenment as a special kind of *experience*. Thus, I do not think that focusing on conceptualism, the conceptladenness of experience, is the best approach—though this is not to deny conceptualism. Instead, I want to focus on sufficient conditions for concept employment in actions that are not accompanied by an explicitly linguistic component, i.e., thought, written, gestured, or spoken words or signs.

In his "Wittgenstein on concepts," Hans-Johann Glock helpfully distinguishes five central questions one might ask regarding concepts, namely:

*Definition* question: What are concepts?

*Individuation* question: How are concepts individuated?

---

<sup>14</sup> [ISSUE! Experience being conceptually structured without having propositional content????!!]

<sup>15</sup> In a paper given for an invited talk at the University of Tokyo in \_\_\_\_\_ entitled, "[left blank for blind review]" and another one at the \_\_\_\_\_ meeting titled, "[left blank for blind review]."

*Possession* question: What is it to have a concept?

*Function* question: What is the role of concepts?

....

*Priority* question: Which of these questions...is the most fundamental?<sup>16</sup>

These questions help to clarify what it is exactly that we are after. What we are after is the issue of concept employment; while this is related to concept possession, it is importantly different. For one might possess certain concepts and not employ them, which is what Kasulis, et al., presumably mean when they say that our lingo-conceptual apparatus occludes how things really are. They are not, I take it, claiming that there are no concepts of enlightenment, emptiness, cause and effect, transitoriness, etc. Rather, the claim is that those concepts occlude the true nature of the “things” they are purportedly concepts of. And, thus, it becomes clear that for our purposes, that the question concerning concepts that has priority is:

*Employment* question: What condition are sufficient for employing concepts?

That the question is asking about *sufficient* conditions is all important. Framing the question in this way allows us to avoid the difficulties of determining individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions, if there are any, for concept employment. But more importantly, what is at issue is whether, for example, a Buddha who has realized enlightenment is necessarily “grasping” reality in the absence of (certain) concepts. What is needed to show this false are examples of actions that are sufficient for concept employment in the context of enlightenment, not what is necessary for concept employment. I will modify the notion of sufficiency below; as we will see, an alternative form of what I call defeasible sufficiency is what is needed to make sense of concept employment.

---

<sup>16</sup> Glock 2010, 92-93.

Since we are concerned with concept employment absent explicit uses of language, the question we need to answer in answering the concept employment question is: What reason is there to think that if someone is acting in a certain way, then that is sufficient for their employing concepts, even if no overt descriptive thought, speech, writing, or signs are accompanying the activity? One route to such an answer would be to argue for X's being the best theory of what concepts are, and then argue further that if that is the correct view, then it implies that if someone is acting in a certain way, then that is sufficient for their employing concepts, even if.... A second route to such an answer might begin, not with the ontology of concepts, but rather with arguing for the best theory of concept possession, and then argue in a similar fashion to the conclusion regarding concept employment.

However, if an argument could be given that would show that on any theory of what concepts are or on any theory of what concept possession is, that if someone is acting in a certain way, then that is sufficient for their employing concepts, even if no overt descriptive thought, speech, writing, or signs are accompanying the activity, we would have a much stronger case in favor of that conclusion. As suggested earlier, in the right context (the context of language, for example) as soon as we engage in certain (rule-governed) patterns of behavior, both linguistic and non-linguistic, we are in the realm of the conceptual, i.e., employing concepts. What needs to be argued now, then, is that that claim is true, and that on the main theories of both concept *ontology* and *possession* it holds.

We turn next to what examples of acting that are sufficient for concept employment. After that we will consider views of concept *ontology* and *possession* in light of what has been argued vis-à-vis concept *employment*.

## Concept Employment

The claim I am making about concept employment is that when a person's doing certain sorts of rule-governed activities is sufficient for their employing certain concepts. To clarifications need to be made at the beginning. First, the person in question could be either someone who has or has not yet learned a language. The people I am interested in here are those who have. So the issue is not whether a person without language but who performing certain patterned (rule-governed) sorts of behavior is employing concepts. That is an interesting question; but it is not mine. The issue we are confronting is whether a person who knows a language, but who is not explicitly using it, is employing concepts when engaging in certain patterned (rule-governed) sorts of behavior.

Second, in discussions of concept *possession*, which is not far removed from concept *employment*, two oft noted activities are *sorting* and *inferring*. In regard to concept possession, for example, the abilities view of concept possession, the general idea is that to possess the concept *plate* means *to be able* to sort plates from non-plates, among other abilities, such as making inferences about plates. Here ability is something connected to know-how and dispositions, i.e., it does not require *occurrent* sorting, but simply the dispositional ability to do so. By contrast, in regard to concept *employment*, what is important is not the "mere" dispositional ability to sort (or infer), but rather actively doing so at a given time. A particularly vivid example of this sort of concept employment is found in Dōgen's fascicle "Cleansing." He writes:

Step inside and slide the door shut with the left hand. Pour a bit of water into the wooden barrel. Then, place the bucket in front of you where it is supposed to be. ...

Pull the bottom and corners of your undergarment, face the door, put your feet on both sides of the top of the barrel, squat, and defecate. Do not stain the sides. Do not soil the front and back [of the barrel top].

Be silent the entire time. Do not converse through the wall or chant aloud. Do not spit in a disturbing manner. Do not groan. Do not write on the wall. Do not draw on the earthen floor with the toilet stick.

After defecating, use the stick for wiping. Another way is to use paper. In this case, do not use paper that has been already used or has been written on.

Be aware of whether the stick is clean or dirty. The stick is triangular [made of bamboo or wood], about eight *sun* long, and as thick as a thumb. Some sticks are lacquered, while others are not. Dirty sticks are put into the dirty stick container. Clean sticks are found on the table close to the edge of the wooden barrel.<sup>17</sup>

Aside from the nod to Zen's penchant for sanctifying shit,<sup>18</sup> I've chosen this passage for three reasons. The first is that it so clearly involves very careful sorting and distinguishing, for example, the front, back, and sides of the barrel from its bottom, and clean and dirty sticks. Second, it so clearly involves the context of Zen practitioners, some who very well may be enlightened, engaging the world in a very ordinary way—something that gets lost in the emphasis of enlightenment being a special sort of (Cartesian) experience. Third, Dōgen's explicit admonition to stay silent, i.e., not to use language. He does not explicitly rule out thinking in words, but it is easy to imagine, particularly in a Zen Buddhist monastery, the exact performance of his instructions without any inward or outward "speech." Yet, it is clear that even without any

---

<sup>17</sup> Dōgen 2010, 53.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Case 21 of the Mumnonkan: "A monk asked Ummon, 'What is Buddha?' Ummon answered, "A dried stick of dung." And Dōgen's, "Last night, this mountain monk [Dōgen] unintentionally stepped on a dried turd and it jumped up and covered heaven and earth. This mountain monk unintentionally stepped on it again, and it introduced itself, saying, 'My name is Shakyamuni.'"

inward or outward speech, such a performance employs concepts, particularly if viewed not only in the context of recurrent performances but also in the context of the monastery and its rules, etc.

Bringing in the idea of repeated performances is important and points us to the complexities of claiming any *particular instance* of an action is sufficient for the employment of a concept/concept group (for we seldom, if ever, employ concepts in isolation). For example, take three of the central sortings that are going on in Dōgen's instructions, namely, sorting the barrel from the sticks and the clean sticks from the dirty ones. One reason to think that a person does not have the concepts down, and thus cannot employ them properly, would be to observe, presumably after the fact, that the sorting has gone terribly wrong. Perhaps, using the container of clean sticks as the bucket. But that would not, of course, necessitate that the concepts were not employed or employed properly. That is, imagine someone who wishes to take petty revenge upon the poor monk whose job it is to clean the wash house. In such a case, the concepts are indeed employed and employed correctly, simply not correctly in relation to Dōgen's instructions. Again, we are taken into the broader context of employment over time. What would justify our saying that the concepts were employed correctly just not according to instructions, would be past and future behavior of the monk in question, and revelation of her intention to take revenge.

The complexity revealed by the vengeful monk is that specifying the exact behaviors that will suffice for employing and particular concepts is going to be difficult. There are potentially countless ways that the same concepts could be employed. How they are employed is dependent in part on the intentions of the one acting. We thus need to bring in further information such as

the broader context of the agent, her intentions, etc. And in the context of that information, the claim is that certain patterned (rule-governed) behaviors are sufficient for concept employment.

However, even with the added specification of broader context and agent's intentions, etc., one might still balk at the idea of any particular pattern of behavior being *sufficient* for concept employment. That is, the connection between the employment of the concepts bucket and toilet stick, and particular behaviors, is not like that between something's being a cherry tree and its being a tree. When each token of "tree" means the same in "A cherry tree is a tree," there is no conceivable world in which something is a cherry tree and not a tree. But one can conceive of bizarre counter examples to a monk who intends to go the toilet, who has learned the rules, done it all before, but when he goes, he is taken over by an unnamed force that renders him unconscious and yet takes him through the appropriate motions in the toilet. Is he then employing the concepts? I don't know; probably not. Philosophers are ingenious at coming up with such scenarios as counter examples. I thus want to introduce what I'll call *defeasible sufficiency*. Douglas Walton contrasts *absolute generalizations* with *defeasible generalizations*. The latter "...make a claim about the way things typically or generally go in a standard or normal case, but they are subject to exceptions."<sup>19</sup> Importantly, those exceptions are not easily, or possibly, foreseeable and thus cannot be built into the generalization in the way that one can by saying, "All frogs except tree frogs and burrowing frogs live at ground level."<sup>20</sup> Talk of "typical," "standard," or "normal" cases is bound to make some uncomfortable, as it can be difficult to specify what exactly is, for example, "normal"; but the difficulty of specificity is at the level of requiring necessary and sufficient conditions for normal or standard cases. A requirement that goes counter to the whole point of talking about defeasible

---

<sup>19</sup> Walton 2006, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Example taken from Walton 2006, 17.



generalizations/sufficiency in the first place. Moreover, what concerns us are standard cases of an agent doing certain things, not any agent in every possible world. Thus, when we talk of sufficiency conditions for concept employment what is meant are *defeasible* sufficiency conditions, even when not explicitly stated as such. Further, I will not always explicitly refer to either defeasible sufficiency conditions or even sufficiency conditions; rather, sometime I will write simply in the form of: *this* behavior means the employment of *this* concept. In such cases, I am also understanding these claims as defeasibly sufficient.

Let us look at another example of sorting to further appreciate the trouble with specifying sufficient conditions for the employment of concepts, and thus the need for our employing the concept of defeasible sufficiency. Take the sorting of dishware. One way to employ the concepts of *plate*, *bowl*, and *cup* would be to sort a clean dishwasher full of dishes in a clearly *ordered* way, for example, into separate cabinets, placing the plates in one cabinet, bowls in another, etc. However, simply putting them all away in a *disordered* jumble would not *necessitate* by itself a failure to *employ* the concepts. However, if it did entail in a particular instance that one was not employing the concepts of *plate*, *bowl*, and *cup*, then if one is separating the dishware from other things in the room by virtue of the fact that one is placing only dishware in the cabinets, and not stray pens, papers, dust pan, etc., then one is still employing either the concept of dishware or some other concept that separates the dishware from non-dishware.

However, there is a much more direct way around the worry about whether concepts are employed in the context of (apparent) non-orderedness/randomness. That is, the point I want to make is that when one *actually* does engage in ordered, i.e., rule-governed, i.e., normatively constrained, patterns of activity, such as sorting, then concepts are being employed even when there is no explicit inward or outward accompaniment of language or linguistic signs. Thus, if

one feels compelled to deny that the example of the disordered “sorting” of the dishware is not the active employment of possessed concepts, that is fine. For what is at issue for us in the context of Zen is the non-disordered, i.e., ordered, activities of a Zen practitioner or Buddha. We will return to this point below.

At this point, one might still ask: Why think that in the case of sorting the dishware in some ordered way *requires* employing concepts, particularly if there is no inward or outward accompaniment of language such as, “The plates go here, the bowls here, and the cups here”? There are two good reasons, beyond what has already been said. The first is to consider the normative aspect of sorting. That is, there are right and wrong ways to follow the explicit instruction of: “Put the plates on the bottom shelf, the cups in the middle, and the bowls on top.” And there is the *recognition* of the right and wrong way of proceeding when sorting. For example, when sorting according to the above instructions, when one notices that a cup has been placed with the bowls and one corrects for it, that is the *recognition* that one has “gone wrong,” i.e., broken the rules for sorting that one was following. This normative aspect is missing absent rule-governed concept employment. Any set of random objects—pen, computer, water bottle, book, etc.—are alike in some ways and different in some ways. That one employs concepts in sorting them can be seen by virtue of the fact that concepts pick out some similarities over others, ignoring some differences over others, and that is what one’s patterned/rule-governed sorting employs.

Compare the case of sorting dishware with another kind of sorting that does not seem so obviously conceptual. For example, consider a non-human animal, say a dog, that sorts food into what we might call *rancid* and *non-rancid*. We risk wading into muddy waters here, but I hope it is reasonable enough to take the dog’s sorting of food in this way not as a rule-governed activity,

but rather as a kind of *instinctual* (or even learned by the experience of rancid food tasting bad) behavior that corresponds to our formulation of the *causal* connection in the form of “rancid smell fails to trigger appetite response” and “non-rancid food smell triggers appetite response.” If something goes wrong in this form of “sorting” it is the functioning of the dog’s nose to detect rancidness, not a failure of the dog to follow a rule properly.

The second reason to affirm that concepts are employed in the active sorting cases with the dishes is to imagine two different people who have been brought up in different cultures, ones that use dishes differently. Imagine Sara is raised in a culture in which due to the nature of the food, it does not matter whether a plate or bowl is used (perhaps there are no soups or soupy foods) and Jill who is raised in a culture in which it is all important whether one uses a plate or a bowl. Give them both the instructions to put the dishes away in an ordered fashion and one readily imagines very different sortings, and ones that upon examination by the other, would provoke mild consternation. This example goes beyond the normativity emphasized in the last several paragraphs because it helps to indicate that the kinds of things, the identity of things, that we sort are not pre-established/pre-given in the form of being something akin to natural kinds such that one might argue that no concepts would be needed for sorting them. And to further address the issue of purported natural kinds, take a sample of gold and a sample of water. For the sake of argument, say they are natural kinds. That would not remove the need for the application of concepts in sorting them, for note, that sorting is an epistemic activity, requiring knowhow, where as *being* a natural kind is ontological. Put simply, gold and water may be natural kinds but that does not obviate the need for concepts when it comes to sorting them. One may sort them from each other or other things in terms of different kinds of value (to life, making jewelry),

materiality (both are material as opposed to, for example, their colors taken as abstract ideas/universals), etc.

The conclusion I take to follow from the above considerations is that in the broader normative context of a lingo-conceptual apparatus employed over time, if S is sorting in an ordered way, i.e., one that is governed by right and wrong conditions (rules) of organizing that which is sorted,<sup>21</sup> then one is employing certain concepts, namely, the ones pertaining to what is sorted. And this even when no explicit inward or outward speech/language accompanies the sorting.

One might try to push all of this back toward the mental/experiential and away from the behavioral/embodied by noting that in the examples of the toilet sticks and the dishware, one can not only perform the sorting by a mere *looking and seeing* but that the seeing is antecedent to the physical act of sorting with one's behavior/body. That is, in an important sense, quite true. Sorting according to Dōgen's washroom instructions or according to one's plan for the dishes requires having some experience of what's what, whether visual or presumably tactile or olfactory. But it is not clear how this is any kind of significant denial that in physically, actively sorting with the body's movements, the use of the hands, etc., one is thereby employing concepts. Further, while experience is certainly at least concomitant to the physical movements, a) one learns sorting by both watching and imitating the sorting actions of others, and b) under normal conditions one's bodily actions are part of one's experience of sorting—there is not first the experience of sorting things in the head and then the body comes into play. One experiences one's hand(s) opening the door to the washroom and one takes in the scene which includes the

---

<sup>21</sup> One might after all sort in a rule-governed disordered way, but that would still be ordered in the sense in question.

experience of the body inhabiting the room and taking it in, the turn of the head from the bucket to the dirty and clean toilet sticks, the body turning to face the door, etc.

While we certainly do more with our lingo-conceptual apparatus than sort things, I have argued that with sorting one is, in ordinary, particularly adult, contexts employing concepts however wordlessly one is otherwise acting. That is, the enlightened Zen master is, even when the mind is still/quiet in regard to explicit outward or inward employment of language, actively employing concepts. We will turn next to consider these points in relation to the main views of concept ontology and possession, but before we do, let us note an important point.

### **Concept Ontology and Concept Possession in Relation to Concept Employment**

Margolis and Laurence distinguish three main views on the *ontology* of concepts—concepts as: mental representations, abilities, and Fregean senses. Jerry Fodor makes a general distinction in regard to concept *possession* between what he calls Concept Pragmatism on the one hand and Cartesianism about concept possession on the other, what I will call Concept Cartesianism.

Beginning with concept *ontology*, the basic point to make is that, just as with the ontology of properties, whether one claims they are universals that may be uninstantiated or instantiated particulars, e.g., tropes, won't affect the claims made above about certain ruled-governed patterns of action being sufficient for concept employment, neither will the differences between concepts as mental representation or abilities, for example. Whether one locates the existence of concepts in mind as mental representations or more in the body-mind as abilities, if one sorts the plates from the dishes by putting them on different shelves, one is employing concepts. This is not to deny that there may be closer affinities between, for example, concepts

as abilities and what has been argued here regarding concept employment. One might attempt to argue from the latter to the former, but that is not my interest here.

Looking at concept *possession*, we can say essentially the same thing. Fodor's distinction between Concept Pragmatism and Concept Cartesianism hinges on the distinction between concept possession being epistemic or not:

What's important about Cartesianism, for my purposes, is that it understands concept possession *nonepistemically*; Cartesians hold that concept possession is an intentional state but not an epistemic one. In particular, it's not what you know (-how or -that) that determines what concepts you have; it's what you are able to think about. To have the concept DOG is to be able to think about dogs as such; and conversely, to be able to think about dogs as such is to have the concept DOG. That's all there is to concept possession, according to (my kind of) Cartesian. Polemics aside, I do find that view plausible on the face of it.<sup>22</sup>

We might notice that there is something a bit odd in his claim that Concept Pragmatism is uniquely centered around epistemic capacities such as *knowhow* when he claims that Concept Cartesianism is an ability, too, namely, the ability to "think about X's as such." But the difference he wishes to make becomes clearer when we turn to his further elaboration on what he calls BCP or the "bare bones version of Concept Pragmatism." The epistemic capacities that are central to BCP, as Fodor understands it, are inferring and sorting. And those capacities are, Fodor believes, distinct from thinking about X's as such.<sup>23</sup> It seems to me that thinking about, for examples, dogs as such, would involving certain sorts of sorting and inference, implicit if not explicit. However, my aim here is not to engage Fodor on these issues. Rather, let us note that, as

---

<sup>22</sup> Fodor 2004, 31. And as he makes clear later (47), he is inclined toward Concept Cartesianism.

<sup>23</sup> Fodor 2004, 32.

with an ontology of concepts as abilities, Concept Pragmatism may well be seen as better wedded with the view of concept employment argued for here. However, since my argument regarding the latter is an argument for *sufficient* conditions on concept employment and not *necessary* ones, Fodor may be right in his views on concept possession without that meaning we've gone wrong in our thinking about concept employment. Thus, if we give Fodor the claim that concept possession centers on mental *events* (thinking about X's as such) and not merely mental *states* such as dispositions; and if we take that to mean that concept possession does not require sorting and inferring, none of that implies the denial of our claim that if one is actively sorting and inferring, even absent the explicit use of language, then one is employing concepts.

We turn now to the central point of this paper, namely, that despite the claims of many in Zen, an enlightened person does indeed employ concepts and not simply ones like *toilet stick*, *clean*, and *dirty*. Rather, one employs the concepts central to Zen Buddhist claims regarding emptiness, in particular, concepts of transitoriness, interdependence, X's being conditioned by Y, and cause and effect, among others. And all of that despite the claim that seeing things as they truly are, i.e., empty, is ineffable.

### **Embodying the Purportedly Ineffable Concepts of Zen: The Trouble with Experience**

A central aspect of much of the writing on Zen, particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is the idea that enlightenment is the cultivation of a special kind of experience. As others have done,<sup>24</sup> I want to question this received view, and, indeed, I am calling it the first dogma of Zen. My point is not that there is an important experiential component to Zen practice/enlightenment. Rather, my claim is that too heavy of an emphasis on the *experience* of Zen can lead us away from the centrality of enlightenment as something enacted and embodied through practice. Enlightenment

---

<sup>24</sup> Robert Sharf is a notable example.

is at heart a way, or better, ways, of engaging the world non-dually through compassion, attention, and letting go, particularly letting go of expectations, among other things.

Hee-Jin Kim is helpful in clarifying the difference in the conception of Zen as the attainment of a mental state versus a practice oriented life:

...often unjustifiably welded into the notion of non-duality has been the most prevalent conception of Zen—largely attributed to D.T. Suzuki—that the essence of Zen consists in the unmediated enlightenment experience (or state of consciousness), totally untainted by ideational and valuational mediations as well as by historical and social conditions. The pure experience (or pure consciousness)—*sui generis*, ineffable and ahistorical—is as such the universal experiential core from which all religions originate and to which they all return. This is the Zen version of *philosophia perennis*, with added Zen and Japanese flavors. Such a Zen, as I see it, is not Dōgen's, because nonduality in this view is thoroughly metaphysicized, rarified, and disembodied so much so that it is ineffective, and ineffectual from the standpoint of practice.<sup>25</sup>

For Dōgen, enlightenment enacted through practice, is not pure, disembodied experience, free from concepts and valuations. Further along these lines, Kōshō Uchiyama helpfully writes:

Zen is often thought to be a state of mind in which you become one with your surroundings. There is an expression which says that mind and environment are one. Enlightenment is understood as falling entranced into some rapturous state of mind in which external phenomena become one with one's Self. However, if such a state of mind were the spirit of Zen, then one would have to still one's body in order to achieve it, and never move. In order to do that, a person would have to have a considerable amount of spare time with no worries about where the next meal was coming from. What this would

---

<sup>25</sup> Kim 2007, 35.



mean, in effect, is that Zen would have no connection with people who have to devote most of their time and energies just to make a living. ...

The expression “mind and environment are one” is accurate, but it does not mean getting lost in a state of drunken ecstasy. Rather, it means to put all of your energy into your work. That is also the meaning of *shikan*.<sup>26</sup>

I take it that part of Uchiyama’s point is that if enlightenment were *the experience of complete oneness* with the world, then one would be unable to function in the world, since the latter requires one to differentiate between one thing and another. As Uchiyama says elsewhere, “We simply cannot live day by day without discriminating. There is no human life in which there is no difference drawn between *miso* and *kuso* [soybean paste and human excrement].”<sup>27</sup>

It would take us too far away from the main argument of this paper to do justice to the points raised by Kim and Uchiyama. Kim’s motive is to go some way toward challenging views such as the one Kasulis attributes to Zen by way of his interpretation of Nāgārjuna. Kim’s point connects with Uchiyama’s point that that Zen practice is a lived, fully embodied engagement with the world. While seated meditation is emphasized, enlightenment is not some disengaged experience on the cushion. Even though Kasulis speaks of an acorn growing into an oak, something experienced off the cushion, we lose sight of the fully embodied nature of the enacting of Zen enlightenment when we think of it primarily in terms of experience. Moreover, experience that is supposed to be free of the (purported) obfuscating effects of language.

The alternative picture that emerges here is that the “experience” of emptiness is not some ineffable quality of our phenomenological consciousness. Rather, it is something we enact

---

<sup>26</sup> Uchiyama 2005, 53. Importantly, as the footnote to the last sentence reads in the original, “In the writings of Dōgen Zenji the expression *shikan* is often used interchangeably with the term *zazen*” *ibid.*, 110, chpt 6, fn 3. Thus, every activity, whether on the cushion or not becomes *zazen*-only.

<sup>27</sup> Uchiyama 2005, 46.

by engaging the world in a particular way, doing particular things and not others. What these “particulars” are needs a great deal of attention. We will speak to some of it below.

But for now let us note the following. Shohaku Okumura helpfully emphasizes the way in which in Zen we are the intersection of equality (unity) and inequality (difference). In his commentary on Dōgen’s “Genjokoan” fascicle he writes that the foundational position of Mahayana Buddhism and Zen is seeing the same reality from these two sides: sameness/difference, unity/separation, equality/inequality.<sup>28</sup> However, and central to the argument of this paper, he points out that for Dōgen, “. . .to see one reality from two sides is not enough; he said we should also *express* these two sides in one action.”<sup>29</sup> As Kim writes, “to see, understand, and express buddha-nature [is] tantamount to acting out buddha-nature.”<sup>30</sup> And as Taigen Dan Leighton comments in the introduction to his and Okumura’s translation of Dōgen’s other main work, *Eihei Kōroku*, “For Dōgen, Buddha nature is not an object to merely see or acquire, but a mode of being that must be actually lived and expressed.”<sup>31</sup> Lastly, as Nishiari Bokusan comments, “There is a point in which you jump off both form and emptiness, and do not abide there.”<sup>32</sup> This “jumping off” is enacted, at least in part, through the embodying of the cluster of concepts constituting the concept of *emptiness*.

---

<sup>28</sup> Okumura 2010, 18.

<sup>29</sup> Okumura 2010, 18. We should note here that these two sides, unity and difference, are often referred to as “the Two Truths,” and in Tendai Buddhism, the third of going beyond them is referred to as “the third truth” (Okumura 2010, 133). The ultimate truth is that things are empty; conventional truth is, for example, the illusory claim of self-same, independently existing things perduring. See Siderits 2007, particularly chpt 9, for a helpful, but I think flawed discussion of the Two Truths. As concerns Dōgen, I follow Kim who sees the two aspects of “conventional truth/reality, i.e., delusion” and “ultimate truth/reality, i.e., enlightenment” not as ontological opposites, contraries, nor the conventional as a stepping stone to the ultimate, but rather as foci or perspectives on the world of birth and death (Kim 2007, 4), foci that must be lived out simultaneously, or better, transcended simultaneously.

<sup>30</sup> Kim 2004, 137.

<sup>31</sup> Dōgen 2010b, 30.

<sup>32</sup> Bokusan 2011, 33.

### **Employing (the concept of) *Emptiness*—Embodying Emptiness**

[Even if one had no word that was equivalent to “I,” “me,” “mine,” etc., if one acted in certain ways, we’d say they are being self-serving and thereby employing, even if unconsciously, the concept of self.]

One of the worries, of course, about concepts from the perspective of Zen is that they seem to reify, which is exactly what Zen (and Buddhism more generally) seeks to transcend. That is, reality, as it is, is empty. Among other things this means that nothing is stable, all is transitory, all lacks independent existence. And, so, applying concepts, which appear to be concepts of stable, persisting, independently existing things, distorts reality. As Kasulis says, in Zen

...reality is what is now happening—it is not outside our experience, but the construct being worked out in our experience. For Zen, this has the implication that reality is protean, always changing shape as soon as we come into contact with it and try to pin it down. By living in the present moment, there is no longer the tendency to make reality into something static or reified.<sup>33</sup>

Important to the argument that I want to give next, Kasulis immediately follows the above paragraph by asking why Zen’s focus on the immediate is preferable to the unenlightened “retrospective reconstruction of reality,” the latter through language and conceptualization. He considers two arguments. The first I will address momentarily, the second involves an appeal to Nishida Kitarō’s notion of pure experience in his *A Study of Good* [insert Japanese]. The latter defense runs afoul of Kim’s earlier criticism of pure experience cited earlier, Sharf’s claims about D.T. Suzuki’s influence on Japanese philosophers, as well as what I will argue below. Thus, I will not address it directly.

---

<sup>33</sup> Kasulis, 61.

Kasulis's first defense of Zen's rejection of the "retrospective reconstruction of reality" is:

...following Nagarjuna's dialectical disputation, we could argue that the distinctions on which analysis depends are intrinsically self-destructive. Thus, every (re-)construction of reality necessarily encapsulates irresolvable oppositions. To use language without being trapped by it, one's understanding of reality must be based on the immediate, nonverbal intuition of *prajñā*. Then, if one finds it necessary to describe or analyze phenomena, one will be cognizant of which aspects the primordial experience are being highlighted and which hidden by distinctions. By recognizing the limitations of language and conceptualization, one can use them without being misled by them.<sup>34</sup>

This is a wonderful passage for our purposes. There are several important points to note about it. First, Kasulis does not outright reject language and conceptualization, but claims that they must be based on an "immediate, nonverbal intuition of *prajñā*," or as one Dōgen translator translates it, "wisdom beyond wisdom."<sup>35</sup> Second, Kasulis is trapped in the conception of language as centrally descriptive or analytical: "if one finds it necessary to describe or analyze phenomena," one can do so, so long as one is wise about it. Third, part of being wise about it is recognizing that one is necessarily distorting or obfuscating experiences that are otherwise primordial or non-conceptual.

Let us begin to push back against these claims by applying the lessons from earlier regarding concept employment. One might say that the central concept that the unenlightened employ is that of *Self*. That is, the concept of a self that is characterized by self-identity over time and discreteness (self-sufficiency), existing independently of other "selves," whether human,

---

<sup>34</sup> Kasulis, 61.

<sup>35</sup> For example, Dōgen 2010.

animal, plant, earth, etc., both diachronically and synchronically. Importantly, this reification of self occurs not simply in lingo-conceptual thought, or written or verbal descriptions as Kasulis seems to imply, but centrally in how one actively engages the world. That is, one reifies things into “selves” in the above sense by the way and manner that one sorts the world into *oneself* and all other selves. However, as has been pointed out earlier, enacting enlightenment, enacting emptiness, requires going beyond both form and emptiness. One does not linger in form, nor does one linger in emptiness, but rather, as Okumura puts it, one expresses both sides in a single action.

What kind of action(s)? Actions that embody the concept of *emptiness*, which means embodying a cluster of concepts that simultaneously take one beyond form and emptiness such that form and emptiness are not enacted as though they were themselves separate concepts, i.e., “selves.” This is to achieve what Kasulis was earlier quoted as calling a fluctuation between contradictory models. I do not intend to give an exhaustive list of the cluster of concepts that make up the concept of *emptiness*, but central to it would be concepts such as *cause and effect*, *transitoriness*, *interdependence*, *interdependent co-arising*, *letting go*, *being without expectation*, *openness to what comes*, and *compassion* and *wisdom (prajñā)*. These concepts are further connected, through relations of identity and conditioning, to concepts such as *Buddha*, *Dharma*, *Buddha Nature*, *karma*, and still others. It is through this cluster/these clusters of concepts that the concept of *self* is both transformed in its simultaneous affirmation and denial.

Part of the challenge at this point is to say something right or useful about the way certain rule-governed patterns of acting are sufficient for the employment of these concepts. Again, the point is to try to identify actions that are defeasibly sufficient though not (necessarily) necessary

for employing the concepts in question. There is not the space to look in detail at each of the concepts in the cluster of *emptiness*. I will focus on *letting go*, *cause and effect*, and *compassion*.

### ***letting go***

In Dōgen’s “Virtue of Home Leaving” fascicle, he begins by approvingly putting forward a lengthy passage from Nāgārjuna’s *Treatise on Realization of Great Wisdom*. Dōgen quotes him, in part:

Further, laypeople are noisy and confused while being occupied in many things. The roots of their driving forces are the center of all the unwholesome actions. That is why lay practice is difficult. Leaving the household is similar to going out into an empty field where there are no people. They can keep their minds unified and free from thinking. As their thoughts inside retreat, their affairs outside also disappear. It is said in a verse:

Sitting leisurely among trees,  
quietly letting go of all unwholesome actions,  
and attaining a single mind free from desire—  
this is pleasure beyond a deva’s bliss.

People seek wealth, profit, fame,  
and desire comfortable clothes and furniture.

Such pleasure is not true comfort,  
wanting profit brings no satisfaction.

While begging food in a patched robe,  
in motion or stillness the mind is always unified.

The eye of wisdom observes the reality of all things.

Within various dharma gates, all equally enter this insight.

The wisdom of understanding is serene,

incomparable in the three realms.<sup>36</sup>

I quote such a lengthy passage because it illustrates various senses of *letting go*. There is the letting go of home by leaving the home, which means not simply letting go of one's attachment to friends and family, but also the pursuit of "wealth, profit, fame, and desire [for] comfortable clothes and furniture." And while the paradigm activity of letting go is *zazen*, or seated meditation, whether in the monastery or "sitting leisurely among trees, quietly letting go of all unwholesome actions," one also let's go of wealth, profit, fame, etc., including unwholesome actions, as one goes about begging for food while wearing the patched robe.

We must be careful here. The claim is not that by merely putting one's body through these motions, particularly in a single instance, that one is *embodying* letting go, *employing* the concept *letting go*. It occurs within a particular context extended over time, namely, the context of sincere Zen practice. In Nāgārjuna's writing here, letting go is contrasted with the life, the lived activities, of the lay person, the person who is caught up in, attached, not letting go of the pursuit of wealth, profit, fame, unwholesome actions, etc. Part of Zen practice is the habituation of what we might call sorting activities into letting go and not letting go, i.e., attachment and non-attachment. Activities of attachment are unskillful in regard to the soteriological end of enlightenment.

In Dōgen's "One Hundred Eight Gates of Realizing Dharma," he quotes approvingly the *Sutra of the Buddha's Practices in Former Lives*. Two important lines therein are, "Letting go is a gate of realizing dharma; it frees you from the five types of desire"<sup>37</sup> and "Branches of letting

---

<sup>36</sup> Dōgen 2010, 797-98.

<sup>37</sup> Dōgen 2010, 898.

go are a gate of realizing dharma; they discern actions.”<sup>38</sup> “Branches” here is in contrast to the “roots” of *trust*, *mindfulness*, *samadhi*, and *wisdom*, mentioned earlier in the sutra. The point, I take it, is that letting go is an action, a gate (a way), into actualizing Buddha; moreover, letting go *branches* out in myriad ways, discerning wholesome actions, ones that embody enlightenment. In other words, through embodying certain activities, e.g., home leaving, zazen, begging, wholesome actions, etc., one continuously employs the concept of letting go, sorting possible desires and actions into skillful and unskillful. And, of course, none of this requires a running commentary of, “Now I let go of this; now I let go of that.”

Leaving it there would, for Dōgen, be too dualistic. As with all dualities, one must transcend them, including the duality of letting go and grasping. One central example of this is sitting *zazen* for no other reason than to sit, thereby letting go of sitting, letting go of enlightenment while simultaneously enacting it: “Each moment of zazen is equally the wholeness of practice, equally the wholeness of realization.”<sup>39</sup> Otherwise, for Dōgen, zazen, practice more generally, becomes defiled by the separation of means and ends, which for him is a denial of the claim that enlightenment is something practiced, something enacted, not some future state of mind to be achieved.

### ***cause and effect***

Earlier we saw that Kasulis used the concepts of cause and effect to help illustrate the way in which concepts are supposed to distort reality. On his reading of Nāgārjuna, we cannot conceive of one thing as the cause of another until there is the other as the effect; but then we

---

<sup>38</sup> Dōgen 2010, 900.

<sup>39</sup> Dōgen 2012, 5 & 7. We should note that as seems to be indicated in the quoted passages to which this note belongs, zazen can be taken narrowly to mean the literal sitting in zazen and more broadly to include the “total exertion of a single” activity; hence, sitting, “upright in samadhi *expressing the buddha mudra [form] in the three activities [body, speech, and thought],...*” (interpolation theirs).



(ought to) see that the two are not really separate in the way that the concepts “try” to make them. I do not wish to dispute his reading of Nāgārjuna, nor do I wish to claim that Nāgārjuna is mistaken in his treatment of cause and effect. What I wish to dispute is the claim that Kasulis makes that the concepts of cause and effect somehow must be transcended if we are to achieve an understanding of how things really are. To begin, let us consider the following from Dōgen:

...students do not understand the principle of causation and mistakenly deny cause and effect. What a pity! Things are deteriorating and the ancestral way has degenerated.

Those who say *does not fall into cause and effect* deny causation, thereby falling into the lower realms. Those who say *Do not ignore cause and effect* clearly identify with cause and effect. When people hear about identifying with cause and effect, they are freed from the lower realms. Do not try to escape this. Do not doubt this.<sup>40</sup>

Dōgen is commenting on a story he has taken from *Tiansheng Extensive Record of the Lamp*. In the story a man who was teaching at the time of Kashyapa Buddha told a student that someone who practices completely no longer falls into cause and effect. The (karmic) effect of this was for the teacher to be “reborn as a wild fox for five hundred lifetimes.”<sup>41</sup> Not only is the Zen practitioner not to ignore cause and effect, but she is to identify with it. A rather strong clue as to why such identification is important and what it would come to can be found in Dōgen’s “Buddha Nature” fascicle, where he writes:

The Buddha said, “If you want to understand buddha nature, you should intimately observe cause and effect over time. When the time is ripe, buddha nature manifests.”

---

<sup>40</sup> Dōgen 2010, 852.

<sup>41</sup> Dōgen 2010, 851.

The words *to understand buddha nature* do not only mean to know but also to practice it, to realize it, to expound it, and to let go of it. Expounding it, practicing it, realizing it, letting go of it, missing it, and not missing it are all *cause and effect over time*.<sup>42</sup>

Importantly, in the same fascicle, Dōgen goes on to say:

Impermanence expounds, practices, and realizes impermanence; all this is impermanence. Manifesting a [buddha] body and expounding dharma with the buddha body—this is buddha nature. Further, it is to manifest a tall dharma body and to manifest a short dharma body. Constantly being a sage is impermanence. Constantly being an ordinary person is impermanence.

This is the meaning of Huineng’s words *Impermanence is itself buddha nature*.

To say that those who are constantly sages or ordinary people cannot be buddha nature is a limited view, the narrow thinking of foolish people. Their understanding of buddha falls short. Their understanding of buddha nature falls short.<sup>43</sup>

Notice Dōgen’s repeated use of “expounding,” “practicing,” “realizing,” and the appearance again of “letting go.” To put all of these passages together: we are to identify with cause and effect—in part, because unskillful actions effect unskillful results, i.e., suffering. But further, we identify with cause and effect because that is what a Buddha *is*, what a Buddha *does* (this *is* and *does* are not separate). A Buddha is not separate from Buddha Nature, understanding this is as: to *embody*, to *practice*, to *realize*, to *expound* Buddha Nature, and these are all “*cause and effect over time*.” Moreover, Buddha Nature is itself impermanence, and whether one is a sage or an ordinary person, that is what one is, i.e., impermanence, i.e., cause and effect over time, i.e., Buddha Nature. In other words, one is to embody emptiness, Buddha Nature, by practicing cause

---

<sup>42</sup> Dōgen 2010, 237.

<sup>43</sup> Dōgen 2010, 243.

and effect over time, by practicing impermanence. And a central way of doing all of this is by embodying letting go, letting go of grasping to the seeming separateness of selves, of self and other, of “things” being self-same over time, etc. One learns the meaning and employment of all these concepts that form the cluster of the concept of *emptiness* in the context of Zen (Buddhist) practice. The concepts are not centrally about descriptions of reality, but rather their *employment is the embodiment of reality as it is, namely, emptiness.*

### ***compassion***

Compassionate activity in the context of Zen practice is the embodiment of emptiness, of the non-duality of self-and other. In Mahayana Buddhism, to which Dōgen’s Zen tradition belongs, compassion is centered in the Bodhisattva ideal. We might say that the Bodhisattva is defined by the Bodhisattva’s vow. One translation of which is:

Beings are numberless; I vow to awaken them.

Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to transform them.

Dharmas are boundless; I vow to comprehend them.

The awakened way is incomparable; I vow to embody it.<sup>44</sup>

As Kim notes, “These vows are recited, reflected upon, and meditated on, by monastics, day and night, to such an extent that the lives of monastics are, in essence, the *embodiment* of vows.”<sup>45</sup>

The Bodhisattva takes this vow so seriously that she delays final enlightenment and returns birth after birth to help free sentient beings from suffering.

---

<sup>44</sup> Tanahashi 2015, 30. Another version is: “Beings are numberless; I vow to free them. / Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them. / Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to enter them. / The Buddha way is unsurpassable; I vow to realize it.” Okumura 2012. Chpt 1, fn. 7. Pages not available in Kindle ebook.

<sup>45</sup> Kim 2004, 204. Emphasis mine.

There are two senses of Bodhisattva in play with Dōgen (and others). That is, there is the Bodhisattva as a way of practicing Buddhism, i.e., the pursuit of liberation for all; and there is the bodhisattva as an “object of faith and devotion.”<sup>46</sup> In his fascicle “Avalokiteshvara,” Dōgen venerates the mythical Bodhisattva of Great Compassion, Avalokiteshvara.<sup>47</sup> He is said to have a thousand arms and eyes. He is:

"One who perceives the cries of the world," ... This bodhisattva is regarded as the parent of all buddhas. Do not assume that this bodhisattva has not mastered the way as much as buddhas. In fact, Avalokiteshvara was True Dharma Illumination Tathagata in a previous life.<sup>48</sup>

So many arms (hands) and eyes are representative of Avalokiteshvara’s ability to extend his “infinite compassion” to all beings.<sup>49</sup> Given Dōgen’s identification of Avalokiteshvara as the “parent of all buddhas” and given that he is the bodhisattva of great compassion, it is not hard to see why Kim would conclude that, “The essence of the bodhisattva ideal [is] great compassion.” All importantly for our purposes, Kim continues:

[The bodhisattva ideal] was [for Dōgen] the reconciliation of the dualistic opposites of self and nonself, sentient and insentient, Buddhas and sentient beings, man and woman, and so forth. As Dōgen stated, “The way of the bodhisattva is ‘I am Thusness; you are Thusness.’” The identity of “I” and “you” in thusness [emptiness/Buddha-nature], rather than identity in substance, status, or the like, was the fundamental metaphysical and religious ground of great compassion. This was why Dōgen said that when we study

---

<sup>46</sup> Kim 2004, 204.

<sup>47</sup> Avalokiteshvara is also the central speaker in the *Heart Sutra*.

<sup>48</sup> Dōgen 2012, 397-398.

<sup>49</sup> Kim 2004, 207. See Leighton 2012, the book in general for information on the bodhisattva ideal, and chapter 7 in particular for more on Avalokiteshvara.

ourselves thoroughly, we understand others thoroughly as well; as a result, we cast off the self and other.<sup>50</sup>

A Bodhisattva, a Buddha, realizes the suffering of others as her own and is moved to free the other from suffering just as much as she might have been moved to free only *herself* from suffering prior to practice. The Bodhisattva Way, the Buddha Way for Dōgen, is the embodiment of compassion for the suffering of other beings, a suffering that is recognized *as one's own*, in the dual sense of “just like the kind of suffering I as a human experience” and in the sense of “not one, not two; not the same, not different.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, in the context of emptiness, acts of compassion—which are through and through every action of a Bodhisattva who embodies emptiness through the selfless, non-judgmental care and attention to everything done, said, and thought—are the expression of the two sides of reality in a single action, as Okumura claims and that I have referred to earlier. We do not dissolve into the other when we act compassionately, embodying the Bodhisattva Ideal. Rather, as Kim writes, “...the dualistic opposites of self and nonself”—jumping off of form and emptiness.

In the context of (practicing) emptiness, compassion expresses both sides of reality, form and emptiness, because it a) involves the recognition of an other as an other, but at the same time b) that “otherness,” that difference, is overcome by the acts of compassion actualizing the non-duality between self and other—the agent of compassion through authentic acts of compassion actualizes selflessness, taking up the suffering of the other as her own. That is, b) is achieved through the kind of selflessness expressed in the cognitive, affective, and embodied aspects of compassionate activity. Such activities are the embodiment of compassion, the employment of the concept of compassion, as one “sorts” compassionate responses from non-compassionate

---

<sup>50</sup> Kim 2004, 208. We will see below in detail what is meant by reconciling these opposites, including what is meant by the reconciliation of the sentient and insentient.

<sup>51</sup> Dōgen 2010, \_\_\_\_\_

ones. In the beginning of practice, such sorting is likely to be more self-conscious and over time become more “natural,” “second nature,” as one conditions one’s habituated patterns of response.

We have explored several aspects of emptiness—*letting go, cause and effect, and compassion*—and seen how they are both embodied and interdependent, the latter as one would expect, not simply with one another but with the other central concepts that cluster with emptiness, such as Buddha Nature. Enlightenment is the continuous practice of letting go of both form and emptiness while simultaneously affirming them both in how one engages and navigates the world. This “navigation” is done by the skillful identification of one’s self with cause and effect, the flux and flow of the moment, which is through and through cause and effect at the level of ontology. But identifying with cause and effect is also affirming that one does not *have* the (karmic) consequences of one’s actions, but one *is* the (karmic) consequences of one’s actions. One’s employment, one’s embodiment, of these concepts—*letting go, cause and effect, compassion*—not only constitutes one’s *being*, but also the *being* of the Buddha Dharma itself:

After all, causation is self-evident; there are no exceptions. Those who act in an unwholesome way decline, and those who act in a wholesome way thrive. There is not a hairbreadth of discrepancy. If cause and effect had been ignored or denied, buddhas would not have appeared and Bodhidharma would not have come from India; sentient being would not have seen Buddha or heard the dharma.<sup>52</sup>

### **Buddha Raises a Flower and Blinks; Mahakashyapa Smiles: The Problem of the Ineffable**

---

<sup>52</sup> Dōgen 2010, 857.

Because it would require space beyond the scope of a single journal article, what follows is meant to be more suggestive and programmatic than earlier portions of this paper. With that in mind, let us note that usually held to be concomitant to the claim that the lingo-conceptual apparatus occludes the true nature of reality (emptiness, for example) is the claim that reality as it really is is ineffable. This implication can be seen in the earlier passages from Kasulis: “Concepts are *samvṛti*; they literally ‘cover’ or ‘obstruct’ the way things are actually experienced.”<sup>53</sup> Further: “The Zen Buddhist view is that intellectualizations, concepts, even language itself are inadequate for *expressing our experience as it is experienced*.”<sup>54</sup> What seems to me typical of the discussions of ineffability in regard to Buddhism and enlightenment that I have read is a conflation of at least two different notions of ineffability. We see this conflation in the two lines above from Kasulis. One notion of the ineffable I call *necessary ineffability*. Something is *necessarily ineffable* if it must be inexpressible or undescribable using our lingo-conceptual apparatus because that apparatus necessarily distorts or occludes the true nature of what is experienced. This view implies, of course, the denial of conceptualism as it says that the experience of enlightenment must be free of the lingo-conceptual apparatus if it is to be truly experienced. It is this notion of the ineffable that this paper seeks to undermine, again, by a) arguing that such an emphasis on enlightenment as a special type of experience is incompatible with Dōgen’s conception of enlightenment as embodied practice and b) arguing that in engaging Zen practice, one employs central Buddhist concepts such as *emptiness* in one’s activities, bodily movements, etc.

The other form of ineffability, and one seen in the second quote from Kasulis—“The Zen Buddhist view is that intellectualizations, concepts, even language itself are inadequate for

---

<sup>53</sup> Kasulis, 23.

<sup>54</sup> Kasulis, 55.

*expressing our experience as it is experienced.*”<sup>55</sup>—is what I call *generative ineffability*.

Something, an experience, for example, is generatively ineffable if a description of it, if an attempt to express it using our lingo-conceptual apparatus, a) fails to convey every aspect of the experience such that b) one hearing the description *does not know for themselves what it is like to experience that which is described*. In other words, words are (often) inadequate for generating the experience in the one who does not have it but merely hears the description (words).<sup>56</sup> What I am here calling generative ineffability is found for example in Ruben L.F. Habito’s quoting of Victor Sogen Hori discussion of koans:

The experience of realization in a koan is indescribable, but only in the very ordinary sense in which all immediate experience is basically indescribable. The resistance of the koan to words is no stronger than the resistance of the aroma of a cup of coffee to verbal expression... To know the sensation of hot and cold is one thing; to explain it to one who does not know it is another. The experience of the realization in a koan is not intrinsically indescribable, but only indescribable relative to the repertoire of experiences of the people conversing. When I speak of the aroma of a cup of coffee and the sensation of hot and cold, other people know what I am talking about because they, too, have smelled coffee and felt the sting of hot and cold. But if I should speak of the taste of the durian fruit, the Southeast Asian fruit with the nauseating smell and the wonderful taste, few Westerners will understand what I am talking about. (Hori 2003, 11)<sup>57</sup>

I do not quote this passage thinking there is nothing problematic about it. But it nicely illustrates the issue with generative ineffability. If you have never experienced coffee, then all my possible

---

<sup>55</sup> Kasulis, 55.

<sup>56</sup> An interesting, though troubling, exception regarding the general “failure” of language to generate certain experiences is the use of language to generate experiences directly involving language, for example, certain insults, particularly slurs that tap into inequalities of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.

<sup>57</sup> Habito 2005, 3.



descriptions will be adequate to generate in you the experience of drinking coffee. Similarly, when one has practiced Zen to the point that one's activities and experiences have shifted from what we might call unenlightened to the (more) enlightened, one's use of language to describe what one understands will fail to generate the experience in others. For example, when one transitions through practice from being easily frustrated to not easily frustrated when one's will is subverted or the transition to experiencing spontaneous compassion in the response to the suffering of others, that experience will not be conveyable, in the generative sense, to one who has not so practiced or had similar experiences.

While necessary ineffability is contradicted by my denial of the two dogmas of Zen, namely, my denial that enlightenment is centrally a special kind of experience, one that is free of concepts, generative ineffability is not contradicted. Moreover, if I have been right in my approach to the employment of concepts and the way practicing Zen means employing the cluster of concepts making up the concept of *emptiness*, we can make sense of two important aspects of Dōgen's Zen. The first is his creative use of language to push the boundaries of the ineffable. Kim is one of the first and main proponents of the view that Dōgen is continually pushing the boundary of the (generatively) ineffable:

Departing radically from the mystic method of *via negativa*, Dōgen was confident in what was yet to be expressed, in what had already been expressed, as well as in what had not yet been expressed or allegedly could not be expressed. Here he concurred with John Wisdom, who wrote: "Philosophers should be constantly trying to say what cannot be said." Philosophic and religious enterprises consisted in fidelity to the inexpressible and in the search for expressibility....<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Kim 2004, 95.

Expression is all important for Dōgen’s conception of Zen: “All Buddhas and ancestors are expressions. Thus, when buddha ancestors intend to select buddha ancestors, they always ask, ‘Do you have your expression?’”<sup>59</sup> But expression here is not simply attempting to describe what is generatively ineffable. Here we come to the second aspect of Dōgen’s Zen that is elaborated by our treatment of enlightenment as the embodiment of concepts. Relating the story of the Buddha transmitting the Dharma to Mahakashyapa, Dōgen writes:

In front of innumerable beings on Vulture Peak, The World-Honored One held up an udumbra blossom and blinked. The entire assembly was silent. Mahakashyapa alone broke into a smile. The World-Honored One said, “I have the treasury of the true dharma eye, the wondrous heart of nirvana. This, along with the robe, is entrusted to Mahakashyapa.”<sup>60</sup>

The transmission of the “true dharma eye” is here wordless. The Buddha presents a flower and blinks. Mahakashyapa alone knew how to respond, smiling, not speaking. In line with the argument of this paper, we can think of both the Buddha and Mahakashyapa as embodying central Buddhist concepts and thereby expressing their understanding to one another. But just as with explicit uses of words to express understanding, the conceptual content of what is expressed is generatively ineffable. The others who are not yet there in their practice, do not understand the Buddha’s actions, his employment and embodiment of *emptiness*. This way of looking at it gives us further insight into Dōgen’s concept of “intimate language” and his treatment of this story of the Buddha transmitting the Dharma to Mahakashyapa. Dōgen writes:

...those who have not heard the teachings of true masters, although they sit in the teaching seat, have not even dreamed of intimate language. They mistakenly say:

---

<sup>59</sup> Tanahashi 2010 edition of the *Shobogenzo*

<sup>60</sup> Dōgen 2010, 503.

The passage, The World-Honored One had intimate language means that he held up a flower and blinked to the assembly of innumerable beings on Vulture Peak. The reason for this is that the teaching by words is shallow and limited to forms, so the Buddha used no words, took up a flower and blinked. This was the very moment of presenting intimate language. But the assembly of innumerable beings did not understand. That is why this is a secret language for the assembly of innumerable beings. Mahakashyapa did not conceal it means that he smiled when he saw the flower and the blinking, as if he had already known them; nothing was concealed from him. This is a true understanding, which has been transmitted from person to person.

There are an enormous number of people who believe in such a theory. They comprise communities all over China. What a pity! The degeneration of the buddha way has resulted from this. Those who have clear eyes should turn these people around one by one.

If the World-Honored One's words were shallow, his holding up a flower blinking would also be shallow. Those who say that the World-Honored One's words are limited to forms are not students of buddha dharma. Although they know that words have form, they do not yet know that the World-Honored One does not have form. They are not yet free from ordinary ways of thinking. Buddha ancestors drop away all experience of body and mind. They use words to turn the dharma wheel. Hearing their words many people are benefited. Those who have trust in dharma and practice dharma are guided in the realm of buddha ancestors and in the realm of going beyond buddha ancestors.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> Dōgen 2010, 533-32.

As with nearly all of Dōgen’s writings, much is contained here that needs to be clarified. But for our purposes, I want to note Dōgen’s claim that if the Buddha’s words were shallow, then so would be his holding up a flower and blinking. Employing words is employing concepts; employing the flower and blinking is employing concepts. What makes them deep or shallow is how and when they are employed. *How*: in what way are they embodied in action? *When*: what is the broader context and who is the audience? Notice further, that what Dōgen here writes is, minimally, in tension with the idea of *necessary ineffability*, and is wholly compatible with the idea of *generative ineffability*. While the Buddha raised a flower and blinked, he could have spoken, as he had many times before. Those words are not fully understood by those who have not achieved a certain level of realization through practice; they are understood by those who have. This despite the problem of generative ineffability. In many contexts, the Buddha’s words are instructions, instructions for employing Buddhist concepts in order to realize, in body and mind (experience), in body-mind, the reality of emptiness. As Dōgen says of Buddha ancestors, “They use words to turn the dharma wheel. Hearing their words many people are benefited.” These words are cause and effect, they are Buddha Nature, they are emptiness, as are the expression (through the embodiment) of these concepts through one’s actions. A Buddha’s every action is *intimate language*.

### **Bibliography [incomplete]**

Dōgen. 2010a. “Buddha Nature.” Trans. Bielefeldt, Carl.

<http://scbs.stanford.edu/sztp3/translations/shobogenzo/translations/bussho/title.html>

- Dōgen. 2010b. *Dōgen's Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei Kōroku*. Trans. Taigen Dan Leighton and Shohaku Okumura. Ed. Taigen Dan Leighton. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Dōgen. 2012. *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dogen's Shobo Genzo*. Ed. Kazuaki Tanahashi. Boston & London: Shambhala.
- Kasulis, Thomas P. *Zen Action Zen Person*
- Kim, Hee-Jin. 2004. *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.
- Kim, Hee-Jin. 2007. *Dōgen on meditation and thinking: a reflection on his view of Zen*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Okumura, Shohaku. 2010. *Realizing Genjokoan: The Key to Dogen's Shobogenzo*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Okumura, Shohaku. 2012. *Living by Vow: A Practical Introduction to Eight Essential Zen Chants and Texts*. Ed. Dave Ellison. Boston: Wisdom Publications. Kindle ebook.
- Sharf, Robert H. 1995. "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience." *Numen*, Vol. 42, No. 3. October, 228-283.
- Uchiyama, Kosho. 1973. *Approach to Zen*. San Francisco & Tokyo: Japan Publications, Inc.
- Uchiyama, Kōshō. 2005. *How to Cook Your Life: From the Zen Kitchen to Enlightenment: Dōgen's classic Instructions for the Zen Cook with commentary by Kōshō Uchiyama Rōshi*. Trans. Thomas Wright. Boston & London: Shambhala.